

# Calendar

## They Skate in the Dark

*The Small, Friendly World of Inline Racing*



*Napa to Calistoga marathon*

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### LOCAL EVENTS

**Y**ou may have seen them training on Pacific Coast Highway — or watched their smoke, at least. They wear distinctive attire. Traditional is a skinsuit, the kind favored by bicycle racers, with one major difference. No butt padding is required. Inline speedskaters never sit down.

Not to be mistaken for recreational skaters, those better suited to the boardwalk at Mission Beach, top men in an inline road-race cruise at an average 20 to 25 mph; their downhill speeds reach 35 mph.

Every Sunday, 6:30 to 9:30 p.m., both men and women on wheels take to the track at the San Diego Velodrome for mock races. This Saturday, it's time for the real thing: the Spring Speedskating Championships.

The ideal body type for speedskating is similar to that for cycling, says Howard Yeh. President of the San Diego Street Elite Inline Racing Club, he is one of the race organizers. (He is also a modest guy who fails to reveal in an interview that he placed first in the Pro/Elite class at last spring's championships.) "You strengthen the same muscles, develop your quads and your leg strength. It's the same set of muscles used for cross-country skiing."

Both brain and brawn is required to

excel. "Beyond pure energy and strength, you have to learn the strategies," says Yeh. "How to conserve your resources. When to pass — when to take that risk. And you learn that the most important thing is to 'group up' with people who can skate at your level."

As in cycling, drafting comes into play — that is, tailgating a faster skater and taking advantage of the reduced air pressure in his or her wake, while simultaneously acting as a drag.

On Saturday, an emcee will point out effective strategizing to the spectators as it occurs. Like any subculture, inline speedskating has evolved an argot, and Yeh provides this helpful list of terms:

A *paceline* or *pack* is a group of racers who skate close together in a single-file line in order to draft.

To *lead* or to *pull* is to skate at the head of the pack and endure the disadvantage of the wind resistance.

To *tuck* is to skate in a lower position (with knees bent, chest down) in order to reduce wind resistance.

To *block* is to slow down a rival pack in order to allow teammates to break further ahead of that pack. Yeh explains: "Usually seen only at the highest advanced or professional levels, it's done simply by leading a pack at a slow pace or skating side-by-side with a teammate on a narrow course."

To *drop off* or *fall off* is what someone does who is unable to keep up

with a pack or with another skater — for example, "I ran out of energy and dropped off the lead pack."

To *go on a flyer* or to *make a break* is to accelerate past the main pack; also called to *gap*.

Pushing and shoving — which is to say, cheating — won't be a problem at the Velodrome, Yeh predicts. "You see it at the highest level, in professional races, when a large amount of cash is at stake." Judges and cameras deter it at those venues. On Saturday, the prizes will be modest — a percentage of the entry fees, along with skate products. Another reason why it stays friendly is because the community is small — a field of 50 is expected — and most racers know each other. "We all shake hands and recap the race afterwards."

The championships on Saturday are being produced by the Southern California Velodrome Association. The day starts with time trials to determine seedings. One subsequent, mass-start event is called Miss and Out, in which the last skater across the finish after each lap is eliminated. When five competitors remain, they take a free lap to recover, then sprint a final lap.

Win and Out is the converse of Miss and Out. The winner of each lap retires.

Skaters who enter the Unknown Distance event aren't told the race's length. They skate in the dark, so to

speak, until they hear the bell, at which point they have one remaining lap, a sprint to the finish.

"It's a young sport, but it's not a young person's sport," insists 26-year-old Yeh. The San Diego Street Elite membership ranges in age from 15 to 55, and Yeh knows of a 90-year-old racer from elsewhere in California.

State law classifies skaters as pedestrians and bars them from streets, even bike paths. Those who catch a pack going on a flyer on Saturday may question that wisdom.

For its part, the San Diego Street Elite website comments: "Unfortunately, [the city of San Diego] follows this strict interpretation [of the law]. However, enforcement is rare, especially if you skate responsibly. We have also found that police in other municipalities, most notably Carlsbad, have been supportive of SDSE. Skate safely and have fun!"

— Jeanne Schinto

**Spring Speedskating  
Championships**  
**Saturday, March 25**  
**(rain date: Sunday, March 26)**  
**10:00 a.m.**  
**San Diego Velodrome**  
**Balboa Park**  
**Entry fee: \$20**  
**Free for spectators**  
**Info: 858-550-0180**  
**or www.sk8.org**